

Heritage Eco-Tourism in Micronesia

Expectations of Government Officials

Cultural heritage tourism is on the increase worldwide, focusing on sites, sights, museums, and cultural experiences such as festivals and traditional communities. At the same time, various decision makers see cultural heritage places as an asset and studies have been undertaken to assess the feasibility of using such sites as attractions. The development of eco-tourism opportunities in the heritage arena has created increased visitor demand, with Micronesia the last largely unassessed region. If heritage eco-tourism is to succeed, coordination and planning are required. This begs the question: What are the attitudes of Micronesian government officials toward eco-tourism and toward cultural heritage sites?

A recent symposium organized from February 28 to March 3, 2000, by the mayor of Rota, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) Historic Preservation Office, and the U.S. National Park Service provided the opportunity to poll participant decision makers. Attended by approximately 100 participants from the CNMI, Guam, Republic of Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Hawaii, the symposium was intended to make a substantial contribution to the management of cultural and natural resources in Micronesia while encouraging ways to develop heritage eco-tourism that is responsible and sustainable.

A questionnaire was administered to each participant (except presenters) at the beginning of the symposium. It contained demographic and attitudinal questions (using a seven-point Likert scale from “strongly agree,” to “strongly disagree”). The overall response rate was 52.2%. Some results of the survey are presented below.¹

The breakdown of the nature of employment of the respondents is important. All too often, symposia such as this are only attended by a specialized, self-nominating minority. At the Rota Heritage Eco-tourism Symposium the key

stakeholders of heritage managers, parks and wildlife staff, and people involved in the tourism businesses (both government and private enterprise) made up 56%, with 34% of the attendees coming from other government agencies (Finance, Public Works etc.). The remaining 10% were students and others.

Who Are The Expected Visitors?

An integral aspect of any heritage eco-tourism development is the ability to identify the potential market. By ascertaining who the perceived visitors are expected to be, it is possible to understand the various attitudes of the government parties involved in the survey. Clearly, eco-tourism is seen as a privilege of the middle-aged wealthy. The demographics of the eco-tourist were perceived to be adults predominantly between the ages of 36 and 50 (63.2%) with a substantial income in excess of \$50,000 dollars (US) per annum (33%). Although all age groups should be considered clientele, it is intriguing that the age profile of the expected eco-tourist roughly resembles that of the respondents.

Profiling Heritage Eco-tourism

The heritage eco-tourism industry does not benefit from a standardized definition. The conceptual definition of sustainability, environmental awareness, economic benefits to local communities, education through interpretation, and social and cultural sensitivity, can be somewhat different to the operational situation.

Do the Micronesian decision makers understand the concept of heritage eco-tourism? Only 1% of the respondents stated that they did not possess an understanding of the concept of heritage eco-tourism. On face value this could be regarded as a positive sign, as one might assume that the participants were well prepared for the symposium. On the other hand, it could be interpreted as misplaced confidence.

The questionnaire posited that heritage eco-tourism does not exist as a bona fide industry, but rather it is just a small segment of the overall tourism industry. Almost 64% of respondents

agreed with this statement. The opinion was more polarized with respect to the assertion that heritage eco-tourism is just a fashionable term for general tourism, which capitalizes on natural and cultural heritage. In that case 43.8% agreed and 56.2% disagreed, with no one undecided on the matter. All forms of tourism capitalize on the natural and cultural resource base of a destination; they are two integral factors in formulating a place, into a primary destination. The concept of heritage eco-tourism is to go beyond this and inspire an appreciation and to educate people about its value. If the participants truly understood the conceptual description of heritage eco-tourism—as their responses to a previous assertion would have us believe—the response should have been decidedly more toward disagreement. As it stands, the responses to this assertion demonstrate the symposium participants' propensity to overstate their prior knowledge.

Although heritage eco-tourism was not perceived to be a bona fide industry, the overwhelming majority of respondents (91.6%) agreed with the assertion that heritage eco-tourism is not a short lived phenomenon, indicating that they believe heritage eco-tourism is more than just a trend and will continue to have a future.

The Impacts of Heritage Eco-Tourism

Heritage eco-tourism is often perceived as “softer” on both the natural and the cultural environment than mainstream tourism. Heritage eco-tourists are often attracted to those sites of particular rarity and of cultural and natural significance. Hence, the threat of impacts to these sites may be greater due to the fragility or significance of such sites. Even if we do pull back from heritage eco-tourism, some impact may not be able to be mitigated and reversed. If left unmanaged, however, the potential severity of these impacts could increase. The survey demonstrated that a large majority of respondents (71%) disagreed with the assertion that we can pull back from heritage eco-tourism development if environmental problems occur and that nature will not heal itself. What could not be assessed is participants' knowledge to what extent re-vegetation of environments could mitigate some or all of the impact.

On the question whether “damage done by tourists to cultural heritage places can be repaired without detriment to our heritage,” 86% of the respondents disagreed. If we combine the responses to the two questions it becomes clear

that the symposium participants had some idea about the fragility of the natural and cultural environment and the lasting effects of any damage done.

Given this, the question has to be posed how that can be achieved. The use of a sacrificial area is one of the common strategies. When assessing the attitudes toward the fragility of sites, it was found that 52% agreed that it is better to have more tourists in a less fragile area than fewer tourists in a fragile area thereby indicating that it is better to sacrifice a resource of lesser fragility in order to ensure the conservation of those more fragile areas. However, 43% of respondents disagreed with this statement, demonstrating that opinions were well divided, possibly due to lack of information on the matter.

Ranking Opportunities

Heritage eco-tourism opportunities arise in many aspects of the natural and cultural environment. By assessing the responses, it is possible to identify the perceptions and values of various heritage eco-tourism opportunities. In keeping with the training opportunities of the symposium 10 options were chosen. Participants were asked to rank these, according to their perceived potential (1 being the most important and 10 being the least important).²

From the 10 options provided, the most prominent response in ranking was archeological sites closely followed by natural landscapes. Both responses could be expected given the theme of the symposium. This is an interesting result when we consider that heritage managers constituted 22% and parks and wildlife staff only 17%. The second cluster comprises local bird life and local plants. The means for both responses were very close together. This ranking is possibly biased by the high percentage of participants from Rota. The fact that local bird life outranks local plants has most likely come about because the symbol of Rota is the Marianas fruit dove, which is also the national bird of the Mariana Islands and features predominantly in a local environmental education campaign.

The third conceptual cluster comprises the social aspects of island life, preferring traditional skills and traditional fishing. The mean of the two are over one ranking unit apart, and the standard deviations are quite large. The transition from traditional fishing to shipwrecks and diving opportunities (part of the next cluster) is not that clear cut.

The fourth cluster comprises the non-indigenous heritage locations. These ranked poorly, with an average rank of 6.5 and less. Of these, World War II sites ranked the poorest, a full rank value lower than the others.

Overall, the rankings indicated that indigenous past was seen as the most important aspect of heritage eco-tourism followed by the local environment. Traditional cultural values are then much less important, while the tangible heritage places associated with colonial administration ranked last. The fact that non-indigenous heritage sites, and in particular WWII sites ranked so poor may be due to the negative perception of the war by the local population.

Priorities for Heritage Eco-Tourism

Asked to rank various priorities for heritage eco-tourism, cultural issues ranked highly, with the options “Preserve cultural heritage sites,” “Ability to showcase my own culture,” and “Preserve local plants & animals” taking the top three spots. Although the survey previously identified that it was the perception of the participants that heritage eco-tourism has the potential to increase visitor numbers without increasing the problems they pose, large visitor numbers were not a priority and ranked lowest.

Discussion

The questionnaire provided a good insight into the attitudes of Micronesian decision makers. The lack of opportunity to pretest the questionnaire resulted in two questions returning ambiguous answers.

The responses to a number of attitudinal questions showed that the decision makers attending the symposium had a limited understanding of the concepts of eco-tourism, despite their initial claim that they did. The opinions were divided whether eco-tourism was a bona fide industry, or whether it was simply general tourism focusing on the natural and cultural heritage. Overwhelming agreement existed on the assertion that eco-tourism was not a short-lived phenomenon. Overall, eco-tourism was perceived to have fewer negative impacts than mainstream tourism. The respondents expressed awareness that the development of eco-tourism may have impacts on the natural and cultural environment, as well as social impacts on the community, that may not be easily mitigated—if at all.

Yet at the same time the participants expressed the opinion that there was much

potential to increase the number of visitors without increasing the problem they pose and that other island communities would be receptive to the development of heritage eco-tourism. The respondents saw archeological and natural landscapes as the main eco-tourism opportunity, while attractions related to the colonial periods were perceived to be much less significant.

While the symposium was successful in raising awareness and the overall state of knowledge on the matter, further training in the form of country-specific case studies is required if the expectations for the economic return inherent in heritage eco-tourism opportunities are to be fulfilled.

Notes

- ¹ A full presentation and discussion of all findings can be found in Dirk H.R. Spennemann, David W. Look, Kristy Graham (2000). “Perceptions of Heritage Eco-tourism by Micronesian Decision Makers,” *Johnstone Centre Report 174*. Albury, NSW: Charles Sturt University, The Johnstone Centre. The report is available for free download in pdf format at the following site: <<http://life.csu.edu.au/marshall/Reports/RotaAttitudes.pdf>> [This is not yet available on the web]
- ² The lack of a pretesting opportunity revealed an unexpected problem. A number of respondents did not rank the responses properly and assigned the same number (commonly the top rank) to a number of options. These multiple responses were excluded in the analysis. Hence the response rate for this section is lower.

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